

Police killings and the collapse of democracy in America

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It is becoming increasingly clear that in working-class communities across the United States, the police function as virtual death squads, beating and killing people with legal impunity.

This reality was once again demonstrated Friday with the killing of 19-year-old Anthony Terrell Robinson in Madison, Wisconsin. On Monday, some 1,500 people, including hundreds of high school students, massed inside the state capitol building to protest the killing.

Matt Kenny, a twelve-year veteran of the Madison Police Department, forced his way into the house where Robinson was staying and fired multiple bullets into the unarmed teenager. The officer, who subsequently claimed Robinson had assaulted him, shot and killed another man in 2007 but was exonerated and even received a service commendation.

Robinson had just graduated from high school and was preparing to attend Milwaukee Area Technical College to study business.

Every day, millions of workers and young people in America face threats, intimidation, beatings and even murder at the hands of cops, whose badges give them a license to kill. Arbitrary police violence and terror are facts of life, alongside chronic mass unemployment, worsening poverty and dwindling educational opportunities.

Robinson is the 192nd person to be killed by police in the US so far this year. In the three days since his death, there have been five more victims. According to official statistics, the number of Americans killed by cops in 2013 was the highest in decades.

Robinson's mother said the young man spoke about police brutality "constantly" and was deeply affected by last summer's protests against police violence in Ferguson, Missouri.

The de facto state sanction for police killings was demonstrated only days before Robinson's death when

the Obama administration announced that it would not file charges against Darren Wilson, the Ferguson police officer who shot and killed 18-year-old Michael Brown, another unarmed African American youth, in August.

Speaking before students at a town hall event in Columbia, South Carolina on Friday, the same day Robinson was killed, Obama defended the Justice Department decision to clear Wilson, who pumped at least six bullets into Brown in broad daylight. Obama praised the police for doing their jobs "fairly" and "heroically."

"Officer Wilson," Obama declared, "like anybody else who is charged with a crime, benefits from due process and a reasonable doubt standard. And if there is uncertainty about what happened, then you can't just charge them anyway just because what happened was tragic."

This is a staggering falsification of due process as defined by the US Constitution, the practical result of which is to virtually preclude the prosecution of cops, no matter how brutal their crimes. Obama ignored the fact that Wilson *was not charged*, and justified this travesty of justice by substituting the standard of proof required to convict a criminal defendant at trial, guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, for the much looser standard, probable cause, for filing criminal charges.

There was more than ample "probable cause" for charging Wilson with murder, including multiple eyewitness accounts, as there was for charging the New York cop who was videotaped choking Eric Garner to death, and was similarly allowed to go scot-free.

The White House has extended to the police the de facto immunity that applies to higher operatives of the capitalist state, such as CIA torturers and their superiors, and those, including Obama himself, who order the extrajudicial assassination of alleged terrorists, including American citizens. This above-the-law status also applies to the Wall Street criminals who plunged the US and the world

into economic slump and have used the disaster of their own making to cheat and steal with even greater abandon, growing still richer in the process.

While Obama demands virtual certainty of guilt to charge police killers, their victims have absolutely no rights. The Declaration of Independence's eloquent invocation of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" is rendered meaningless in a society where police operate as judge, jury and executioner, free to snuff out the life of a youth like Tony Robinson, secure in the knowledge that they will not be called to account.

That police in large swaths of America function as the equivalent of paramilitary counterinsurgency and occupation forces was indicated by the Justice Department's own report on systematic police abuse in Ferguson, released the same day as the announcement that officer Wilson would not be charged.

The report declared that "officers violate the Fourth Amendment in stopping people without reasonable suspicion, arresting them without probable cause, and using unreasonable force." It noted that "people are punished for talking back to officers, recording public police activities, and lawfully protesting perceived injustices."

The report cited the example of police siccing a dog on a fourteen-year-old boy, then "[striking] him while he was on the ground, one of them putting a boot on the side of his head," and laughing about the incident afterward.

Contrary to Obama's claim that the regime of terror in Ferguson is not "endemic" to America, the federal government itself has issued similar reports over the past year on the police departments in Cleveland and Albuquerque, New Mexico. The same conditions prevail in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit and every other city in the country.

What accounts for the growing wave of police violence and murder? Attempts to attribute the situation to a few "bad apples" or even mere corruption are derisory. A phenomenon of such virulence and on such a scale must reflect objective factors deeply rooted in the structure of society. Even if one wished to put the primary blame on the homicidal tendencies and social backwardness, including racism, of individual cops, the question that would have to be answered is: Why are such forces recruited in such numbers into the country's police departments?

The United States is riven by social and class contradictions that can no longer be contained within the framework of bourgeois democratic procedures. First and

foremost is the ever more virulent growth of social inequality. This goes hand in hand with escalating military violence and aggression internationally, as the American ruling class seeks to offset its economic decline by means of war and plunder.

Endless war and militarism abroad fuel the militarization of society at home. The American ruling class looks upon the American working class as its greatest enemy. It lives in perpetual fear of the emergence of mass social opposition to inequality, war and repression. Hence the militarization of the police at home and the increasing use of the counterinsurgency methods of murder and repression employed in Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries against workers and youth within the borders of the United States.

Madison, the state capital of Wisconsin, was the scene of mass protests by workers and young people in 2011 against the drive by Republican Governor Scott Walker, who is now seeking his party's nomination for US president, to slash social spending, cut public employee pensions, and strip workers of their right to bargain collectively.

Last month, Walker, referring to the US war against ISIS, declared, "If I could take on 100,000 protesters, I could do the same across the world," implicitly drawing an equal sign between working-class demonstrators and terrorist groups targeted by the US for annihilation.

Walker's statement reflected the real state of class relations in America. It pointed to the fact, deliberately obscured by the single-minded focus on race on the part of the political establishment and the media, as well as their pseudo-left appendages, that the essential division in American is between the working class and the capitalists.

While racism certainly plays a role in police violence, the attempts to present the issue as primarily one of race serves to block the working class from recognizing that the root cause of repression and poverty is the capitalist system, and that the defense of democratic rights requires the unification of all sections of the working class in the struggle for socialism.



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